“Our house is on fire”: Three Rhetorical Findings from Youth Climate Activists, an Emerging Discourse Community

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Abstract:

Despite overwhelming consensus among the scientific community that modern observed global warming is the result of human activity, the causes, impacts, and actions required to mitigate climate change remain divisive topics around the world. While the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concludes the planet has as little as twelve years to act, civilians and political leaders continue to engage in public debates about the legitimacy of climate science and scope of necessary mitigation. Rhetoricians have already begun work at the intersection of science-based deliberation and public negotiation. However, such research has yet to explore the rhetorical implications of work from youth climate activists. This paper reports on the latest generation of youth climate activists. I specifically attend to the organization Fridays For Future founded by Greta Thunberg in 2018. By undertaking an analysis of rhetorical artifacts from the international network of youth climate activists, this article reveals the rhetorical moves of young people who intend to influence legislation and policy. How do youth activists position themselves to speak on behalf of a public, scientific dilemma while in a position of inferiority or civic exclusion? Exporting rhetorical theory to study youth environmental advocacy offers three findings:(1) youth climate activism engages in rhetorical ecologies, or networks of material experiences and public feelings; (2) youth climate activists are better understood as alternative science communicators with the potential to reinstate expert authority and public trust in science; and (3) youth climate activists observe a broken social order and make ethical appeals to social responsibility and maturity.

Introduction

In August 2018, 15-year-old student, Greta Thunberg, sat outside the Swedish parliament building carrying a homemade sign which read "School Strike for Climate." Thunberg started skipping school every Friday to pressure Swedish lawmakers to take even greater action to mitigate the effects of climate change. What began as an attempt to prioritize the issue before the country's general election unexpectedly launched a global movement led by youth around the world.

Youth climate activists have attempted to influence action towards climate change for nearly three decades. After the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, the first youth groups emerged, such as The European Youth Forum and SustainUs. A decade later, large intergovernmental conferences began inviting these organizations to participate in coordinated efforts against climate change, which inspired even more youth participation. But youth-led environmental activism amassed greater attention and legitimacy in 2018, after Greta Thunberg's actions in Stockholm. Her message spread internationally under the hashtags #FridaysForFuture and #SchoolStrike4Climate. Rallying beside Thunberg, the latest generation of youth environmental activists is decentralized, but highly coordinated and increasingly visible through social media and press coverage. Thunberg eventually became the founder of a global climate strike organization with the name "Fridays For Future." The name refers to the central action of its activists: skipping school every Friday to protest government inaction. Their goal is to morally pressure policymakers to take forceful action that mitigates global warming ("Who We Are"). Anyone in the world can register or report a demonstration under the Fridays For Future name. Through event registrations and engaged social media hashtags, the organization is able to track and quantify their actions. At the group's peak in 2019, they boasted roughly 3.5 million

members from over 150 countries. Members of Fridays For Future and allied climate activist groups organized the world's largest environmental demonstration in September 2019, with an estimated six to seven million participants (Taylor et al.). Media later coined the term "Greta effect" to describe the legions of students skipping school to advocate for environmentally friendly policies.

Few studies from the fields of rhetoric and public discourse have attended to the growing community of youth climate activists, and questions about the unique power of their voices have yet to be answered. How do youth activists position themselves to speak on behalf of a public, scientific dilemma? Accordingly, how do young people establish ethos in adult-dominated spaces? And how does rhetoric from youth activists catalyze actions to mediate climate change? The sophisticated network of youth activists engages in public demonstrations, online campaigns, and political orations in front of government leaders. Mobilizing rhetorical theory to analyze their arguments will advance understanding of an emerging discourse community, a community with increasing influence around the world. This paper analyzes orations from Fridays For Future activists to understand how they construct compelling arguments to rally the largest climate protests in history. Through a close study of Fridays For Future's youth environmental advocacy, I identify three findings related to rhetorical theory: (1) youth climate activism engages in rhetorical ecologies, or networks of material experiences and public feelings; (2) youth activists are better understood as alternative science communicators, and they speak with the potential to reinstate expert authority and public trust in science; and (3) youth climate activists observe a broken social order and make ethical appeals to social responsibility and maturity.

Methods

Fridays For Future activists use a range of methods to facilitate climate strikes and disseminate their call for action. This study specifically samples speeches delivered by Fridays For Future youth activists on the world stage. The United Nations defines "youth" as persons between the age of fifteen and twenty-four, a group that currently accounts for sixteen percent of the global population ("Youth"). However, much like other studies of youth activism, this paper refers to youth as people from childhood into their twenties. Children under the age of ten often participate in climate advocacy including Licypriya Kangujam who spoke at the United Nations Climate Conference in 2019 at the age of nine. This phase of life is marked by a physical, social, and psychological transition to adulthood. However, a more important context to my study is the sociocultural, economic, and political barriers of people at this age. Globally, the most common voting age is eighteen, with a general range from age sixteen to twenty-five. Voting, a pillar of civic engagement, is therefore inaccessible to many young activists. Instead, they mobilize through physical demonstrations and decisive rhetoric. Activism allows young people to democratically participate in policies that affect their future.

The convenient sampling of this study focuses on prominent figures of the Fridays For Future movement. Presently, the individuals are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, but at the time of their speeches, they were all under the age of eighteen. Three speeches come from the group's founder, Greta Thunberg. One was delivered by Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, the founder of Uganda's chapter of Fridays For Future, and the final artifact comes from Irish climate activist, Theo Cullen-Mouze. Each of the orations were given at high-level assemblies of governmental leaders, such as conferences of the United Nations, C40 World Mayors Summit, and World Economic Forum, and the average length of all five speeches is four minutes and

twenty seconds. The selected speeches are considered representative of the overall Fridays For Future movement because they are featured on the organization's YouTube and website — on the "Activist Speeches" webpage. This study is interested in how young people position themselves to speak with authority on behalf of a public scientific controversy. Targeting activist speeches at governmental conferences focuses on situations in which youth engage with hierarchical power dynamics.

Finding 1: Youth climate activism engages in rhetorical ecologies, or networks of material experiences and public feelings (Edbauer 2005)

In order to characterize youth activist discourse, we must situate it in regard to rhetorical theory. Historically, one of the most influential theories towards understanding how discourse communities accomplish rhetorical and material goals is Lloyd Bitzer's thesis "The Rhetorical Situation" which claims, "the presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation" (2) and "the situation is objective, publicly observable, and historic" (11). Since Bitzer's foundational work, however, rhetorical theorists have complicated the notion that rhetors position themselves to *respond* to situations with independent and objective meanings. In 1973, Richard Vatz centers the rhetor, arguing that events only become meaningful through the language used to describe them which places rhetors as the creators of meaning (157). In "Rhetoric and Its Situations," Scott Consigny addresses the antinomy between Bitzer and Vatz by proposing rhetoric as an art form (Consigny 185). However, the field has largely moved towards contemporary models of rhetorical ecologies, which seek to recognize how networks of people continually encounter one another through writing (Cooper 369). Cooper explains, "All the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and

are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the system" (368). By examining rhetorical artifacts from the community of youth climate activists, we see how the long history of climate denial as well as the ideology of climate justice reaffirms ecological frameworks in rhetorical theory.

Climatology, or the scientific study of climate, is an interdisciplinary field with origins in the nineteenth century when geologists first debated what forces could displace boulders across far distances. The field has a robust history where discoveries in the causes of global warming developed alongside actions from fossil fuel lobbyists and corrupt politicians to undermine public trust in climate science. In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, formed as an autonomous and intergovernmental body to synthesize the breadth of climate science research and assess the risks of human-induced climate change. At the time, governments faced increasing pressure to address concerns about the greenhouse effect from the scientific community. In the summer of 1988, for example, NASA climate scientist James Hansen testified in front of the United States congress saying, "The greenhouse effect has been detected and is changing our climate now" (Kolbert). Hansen's testimony is over 30 years old, but his observations of global warming and its effects on global climates have been affirmed many times over.

Discoveries in radiative forcing, paleoclimateology, and climate modeling have since concluded with high confidence that human activities have caused approximately 1.0°C of global warming and will likely reach 1.5°C in the lifetimes of children living today – causing great threat to future generations ("IPCC: Summary for Policy Makers"). The impacts of climate change are mainly irreversible and actions to moderate environmental damage fall on today's scientists, activists, and political leaders (Dessler ix). However, notable politicians continue to

participate in climate denial. During a 2020 brief on California's historic wildfires and their connection to climate change, former U.S. President Donald Trump expressed, "Well, I don't think science knows, actually," indicating disbelief in modern climate science at the highest level of political authority (Wise). While civilians and political leaders continue to debate the legitimacy of climate change, the IPCC estimates that the world has roughly twelve years to reduce emissions and limit global warming before reaching the 1.5°C threshold.

Controversy over climate science is not about the proof of rising average temperature but rather the political significance of rising temperature—ninety-seven percent of actively publishing climate scientists agree on the existence of anthropogenic, or human-induced, climate change (Cook). Despite consensus within the scientific community, climate change remains one of the most divisive topics around the world. Data from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication estimates only fifty-seven percent of U.S. adults think global warming is caused by human activities, pointing to a huge discrepancy in public awareness of scientific fact (Marlon et al). The climate change controversy reveals that public knowledge is a function of those who produce it— in this case, scientists— and the mediators that educate and initiate action.

Scholars have already begun to study the rhetorical tactics used to manufacture such scientific controversy. Paroske first created the concept of an "epistemological filibuster" to define a common rhetorical tactic used to manufacture controversy. The epistemological filibuster functions by stating that there is ongoing scientific debate on a topic that actually achieved scientific consensus (Paroske 151). Ceccarelli applied Paroske's concept to global warming skepticism to illustrate how politicians are able to exploit the fact that science is inherently probabilistic in order to suggest disagreement (Ceccarelli 197). Crick and Gabriel

similarly situate global warming as a "public scientific controversy" defined by disputes about scientific knowledge that arise when technical authority intersects with public interests (202). Crick and Gabriel employ their framework alongside Bitzer's claim that "rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation" (Bitzer 9). While Bitzer's foundational work helps conceptualize important elements of writing such as exigence, audience, and constraints, an ecological framework better theorizes how temporal, historical, and lived experience interact to shape discourse—especially in the case of climate change (Edbauer 2005, Cooper 1986).

In her description of rhetorical ecologies, Jenny Edbauer imposes a fluidity between the components of Bitzer's rhetorical situation. Instead of solely conceptualizing discourse as a collection of elements—for example, speaker-audience-exigence—Edbauer recontextualizes those elements in flux with historical, active, and public processes (8). One example of rhetorical ecologies at play can be seen in the evolution of addressing climate denial. As individual and collective human understanding of climate change progresses, discourse about the issue continues to reshape around its complicated history. Michael Warner explains, "Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link … it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction" (Warner ctd. in Edbauer 5). In the context of environmentalism, for instance, activists still engage with the lasting legacy of climate change denial.

A closer look at Greta Thunberg's speech at the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit demonstrates this interaction. In a speech delivered to world leaders from government, private sectors, and civil society, Thunberg emphasized, "For more than thirty years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight" ("We'll Be Watching

You"). Her assertion that the audience "continue to look away" even though "science is clear" is essentially tied to the history of climate denial. Notably, the purpose of Thunberg's speech is not to convince the audience of climate change by detailing the processes of environmental systems and feedback loops that drive global warming. Scientific consensus has already been achieved and explanations of climate change causes already exist and circulate publicly. Instead, Thunberg's speech seeks to denounce the adults' inaction regarding the truth of climate change. Thunberg continues implying her audience's ignorance, saying:

> You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe. ("We'll Be Watching You")

In this section, Thunberg continues to fault adults for not listening to the scope of climate science or considering proposed solutions of the climate emergency. She claims that the audience does not understand the urgency of the issue.

Bitzer's model of rhetorical situation might describe physical climate changes, such as ocean acidification, glacial retreats, and extreme weather events, as an exigence for Thunberg's words. But what features of climate change are at stake? According to Bitzer, exigence which generates discourse is located in reality and publicly observable fact (11). However, environmental change is an extensive phenomenon that requires research from technical experts to link large-scale environmental change from human activity to catastrophes such as California's 2020 wildfires. Thus, I argue climate change is not inherently publicly observable, contrasting Bitzer's concept of exigence in rhetorical situations. In her speech, Thunberg signals

that scientific observations are necessary to understand the scope of change, while castigating the audience for their failure to take up scientific fact in favor of economic stimulus:

> To have a sixty-seven percent chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise—the best odds given by the IPCC—the world had 420 gigatons of CO2 left to emit back on January 1, 2018 … How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? (“We’ll Be Watching You”)

Her dynamic interaction with the socially constituted systems of climate denial aligns with tenets of ecological models of writing. Cooper explains, “Systems are not given, not limitations on writers; instead, they are made and remade by writers in the act of writing. It is in this sense that writing changes social reality and not only, as Lloyd Bitzer argues, in response to exigence” (368).

Ecologies of rhetorical interaction also become evident when comparing previous discourse surrounding climate change to new rhetoric from youth climate activists. Consider, for example, lines from a 1989 article written by then U.S. presidential candidate Al Gore:

> As a nation and a government, we must see that America's future is inextricably tied to the fate of the globe. In effect, the environment is becoming a matter of national security—an issue that directly and imminently menaces the interests of the state or the welfare of the people. (Gore)

At the time, Gore was a leading environmentalist who held the first congressional hearings on climate change, toxic waste, and global warming. His comments in the *Washington Post* center the future of the United States as a reason to mediate climate change. In his case for political action, Gore quite literally refers to the climate change issue as “a matter of national [U.S.]

security," while still alluding to the nuances of the global consequences of climate change. National interests and subsequent inaction make the dilemma urgent, at least for Gore in 1989.

In contrast, the current generation of youth environmental activists conceptualize climate change as a matter of social justice and more strongly emphasize the global stakes of climate change. Hilda Flavia Nakabuye, founder of the Ugandan chapter of Fridays For Future, spoke about the inequitable consequences of climate change at the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25). Her words emphasized climate justice, a central ideology of Fridays For Future and the larger youth climate movement:

> I am the voice of dying children, displaced women and people suffering at the hands of a climate crisis created by rich countries. Voices from the global south deserve to be heard. Animals, forests, fish, and birds from Africa may not count to you as they do to us. But at least make us count. We are humans. We are humans who do not deserve to suffer a crisis that we did not create. (Nakabuye)

Climate justice recognizes that the impacts of environmental change are not distributed equally or fairly. Its impacts disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups, exacerbating social inequities for low-income communities, people of color, and those with chronic illnesses. As an identifying member of those communities, Nakabuye speaks on their behalf to place blame on rich countries and point to their inhumane actions. Climate justice links human rights and climate change in order to advance the problem as an ethical, social, and political issue. Nakabuye's stance that the climate crisis is a symptom of capitalism, class divide, and racial inequities is a shared belief of the Fridays For Future movement. Whether through social media or during physical demonstrations, the group frequently repeats, "There is no climate justice without racial justice" (@fridaysforfuture). Climate justice connects broad human rights concerns to the

climate crisis, implying that the climate crisis connects systems of ideas, purposes, interactions, and cultural norms as an ecology of writing.

The rhetorical significance of climate denial and the climate justice movement suggests that situations may not have intrinsic meaning in and of themselves. Rather, youth activists as rhetoricians use their voices to shape and reshape the urgency of the climate change dilemma. However, to revise Vatz's assertion that rhetors choose to make situations salient, I affirm that those choices are part of active, historical, and lived processes and should be re-read in the ecologies or historical fluxes in which they operate (Edbauer 8). Because the climate change dilemma is not fixed, rhetoric that responds to it operates in a network of affective ecologies. And because our understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change continually changes, so too do the motivations and elements of speech surrounding the issue.

Finding 2: Youth activists are better understood as alternative science communicators, and they speak with the potential to reinstate expert authority and public trust in science.

As rhetoricians addressing a global audience, youth climate activists work strategically in technical, political, and public domains. In 1982, G. Thomas Goodnight published a treatise on public deliberation which outlined three contexts, or "spheres," for argumentation. Goodnight describes these spheres as "the grounds upon which arguments are built and the authorities to which arguers appeal" (200). The technical sphere is characterized by meticulous rules and strict structures for evaluating arguments. Technical arguments present evidence verified by experts in particular fields of study. Unlike the technical sphere, the personal sphere embodies conversations between individuals in a private setting, where claims are considered more loosely. And the public sphere is a landscape for processing concerns that affect the entire public.

Goodnight's foundational work warns of danger when spheres of argumentation encroach on one another—particularly, when different standards of expertise from each sphere converge, causing deliberations in the public sphere to formulate improper judgements and even diminish. In 2012, Nicholas S. Paliewicz applied the reverse of Goodnight's theory to note the risk of the public sphere's usurpation of the technical sphere which undermines the legitimacy of expert knowledge.

Controversy over climate change approaches the danger that Goodnight feared because public and personal deliberations continue to question the validity of science and usurp the role of technical experts. Thirty-five percent of U.S. adults discuss global warming at least occasionally, and twenty-five percent of adults hear about global warming in the media at least once a week (Marlon et al). These statistics would indicate that climate change discussions occur frequently in personal, technical, and public spaces in the U.S. Overlap between these three distinct spaces has produced a crisis of rhetoric in regard to the issue of climate change.

Youth activists enter these already muddied spaces facing negative assumptions about their credibility and status. Appropriately, they haven't undergone the rigorous tests of knowledge in order to claim expert status. However, as Davies and Horst point out, science communication encompasses varied actions aimed at communicating scientific knowledge to non-scientist audiences (4); therefore, youth climate activist rhetoric is still consequential to the scope of public communication around climate science. But rather than act as science communicators, by detailing the specific physical processes and evidences of climate change, youth activists shape discourse around climate change by grounding empirical evidence (logos) and mobilizing pathos-based rhetorical strategies. I draw on contemporary research, such as Feldman (2020) and Fähnrich (2018), that affirms the relationship between environmental

activism and science communication and defines youth activists as “alternative science communicators” because of their use of science to influence political decision-making and to motivate civic action (Fähnrich et al. 2). I maintain that Fridays For Future activists act as alternative science communicators because of their contributions to public communication and public perception of science (Fähnrich 3). By strategically distinguishing themselves from technical experts, Fridays For Future activists uphold expert authority which has the potential to reinstate expert authority and public trust in science.

Thunberg’s address at the World Economic Forum in 2019 exhibits the interaction between appeals to science (logos) and emotion (pathos). Thunberg’s speech begins, “Our house is on fire,” a phrase that has since been used widely during physical or online demonstrations and used as the title of a subsequent short film produced by Fridays For Future in 2020. In the film, a family of four prepares for school, unbothered by the flames of fire surrounding them as they sleep, eat, and live (“Our House is On Fire” [*YouTube*]). The “house on fire” metaphor connects vivid imagery of domestic destruction to the 1.5°C threshold of global warming established by the IPCC. Thunberg elaborates,

> According to the IPCC, we are less than twelve years away from not being able to undo our mistakes. In that time, unprecedented changes in all aspects of society need to have taken place, including a reduction of our CO2 emissions by at least 50%. (“Our House is On Fire”)

This passage demonstrates how youth activists do not seek to teach climate science or necessarily address the public’s gap in knowledge. Instead, they merely cite research in order to advance environmentally friendly policies and action. Speaking from the margins of society, youth activists rely on work from sources of technical authority, such as the IPCC, in order to

substantiate their arguments (Fähnrich 3). Thunberg's address positions scientific fact as the guiding principle of action. Counter to her speech at the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit, these words do not engage with the history of climate denial. However, both orations accept the conclusions of the IPCC as fact, suggesting the only place to move forwards is from the position of scientific consensus. Having accepted scientific knowledge, the public can use it to determine appropriate policies. Paliewicz explains "Policy judgments remain in the province of the public sphere, but such judgements are most useful when informed by the best technical data" (233).

The rest of Thunberg's speech in Davos echoes her larger argument for action and articulates the IPCC's conclusions as an emotional, existential threat:

> Solving the climate crisis is the greatest and most complex challenge that Homo sapiens have ever faced. The main solution, however, is so simple that even a small child can understand it: We have to stop our emissions of greenhouse gases. Either we do that, or we don't. You say nothing in life is black or white. But that is a lie. A very dangerous lie. Either we prevent 1.5°C of warming or we don't. Either we avoid setting off that irreversible chain reaction beyond human control or we don't. ("Our House is On Fire")

Thunberg's argument evokes fear of impending climate disasters. Her apocalyptic narrative integrates measures for preventing catastrophic environmental change—the 1.5°C threshold—with emotionally charged ultimatums: "Either we prevent 1.5°C of warming or we don't." By not attempting to justify or explain the science behind the IPCC's conclusions, Thunberg upholds technical authority and positions scientific research as information necessary for making the best policy decisions. She renders herself an advocate of science trust, instead of placing herself as the source of scientific knowledge. This positionality has the potential to reinstate the expertise of climate scientists and, by doing so, rectify Goodnight's model of public deliberation.

Reestablishing technical authority and public trust in science is a larger ideology of Fridays For Future, and the organization works to restore trust in science even in regard to other scientific controversies. For example, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, Fridays For Future social media accounts unilaterally broadcasted instructions on how to continue protesting climate inaction while at home. On her social media channels, Thunberg explained, "We can't solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis and we must unite behind experts and science. This of course goes for all crises" (@GretaThunberg). Accordingly, Thunberg and Fridays For Future unite behind experts of various fields of science. By applying their ideology of science trust to other public scientific dilemmas, youth climate activists solidify their position as alternative science communicators worthy of their own trust and credibility.

Finding 3: Youth climate activists observe a broken social order and make ethical appeals to social responsibility and maturity.

In addition to balancing between the technical and public spheres as alternative science communicators, youth climate activists also have to strategically position themselves among adult-dominated public spaces more broadly. On the one hand, young people are largely excluded from political conversations because they lack access to fully participate as citizens through voting or running for office. And youth are more generally denied authority in public and political spaces due to assumed lack of knowledge and experience. Feldman explains, "Young people face significant challenges when they attempt to involve themselves in politics, as they are considered lacking in the civic experience to make rational choices in the political

sphere" (5). Instead, youth climate activists mobilize through civil discourse that simultaneously advocates for their right to participate in decisions that significantly affect their future. Youth activists frequently address their position of inferiority in society, and they actually appeal to the irony of their role in speaking on behalf of the crisis and connect it to the hypocrisy of the adult figures in the room.

Revisiting Greta Thunberg's speech at the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit reveals how young people make this appeal. Her address begins, "This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope" (Thunberg "We'll Be Watching You"). Her words address the obvious controversy that schoolchildren have become token figures in the debate over climate mitigation. In a twist from plainly stated methods of appeal, Thunberg suggests that her position is erroneous. Schoolchildren should not be solving the climate change crisis because they lack the knowledge, expertise, and experience necessary. This argument conceivably opens up the adult audience as it seems to confirm beliefs in the inferiority of children to engage with public policy decisions. The effect of Thunberg diminishing her credibility includes an ethical appeal to social responsibility and the instinct of adults to protect children. Her words indicate that the social order has been broken, causing children to advocate for themselves and participate in civil discourse when they otherwise wouldnt. She continues, "You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you," indicating further breakdown of conventional power hierarchies (Thunberg "We'll Be Watching You"). Thunberg's observation, "The eyes of future generations are upon you," followed by the threat, "We will never forgive you," alludes to the eventual power turnover, where today's youngest generation will assume

authority over political decision-making and hold older generations accountable for their "betrayal" ("We'll Be Watching You"). In this sense, Thunberg appeals to the future status of her generation's authority.

Irish climate activist Theo Cullen-Mouze offers a more direct example of this strategic power maneuver. Inspired by Thunberg's speech at COP24, Theo Cullen-Mouze began organizing climate strikes within his small Irish community to replicate the school strikes taking place elsewhere in the world. Cullen-Mouze eventually joined the Ireland branch of Fridays For Future and became a significant figure among the organization. In his speech at UNICEF COP25, an intergovernmental panel that met in December 2019, Cullen-Mouze represented Fridays For Future Ireland: "My name is Theo Cullen-Mouze. I've just turned 17. Of course, I like being treated as an adult, but as a legal child, today I am speaking to you as a child. I would like to address the policymakers in this building and beyond" (Cullen-Mouze). In similar fashion to Thunberg, Cullen-Mouze strategically positions himself as a child and seeks to address policymakers (adults) from the position of assumed innocence and inferiority. By distinguishing himself as a child, Cullen-Mouze acknowledges the self-directing freedom of adulthood, as opposed to the sense of paternalism experienced in childhood. He alludes to paternalism later in his speech saying, "Normally, adults mind their children. Normally, adults make sure that their children don't do anything stupid. Normally, adults help children avoid putting their futures at risk" (Cullen-Mouze). Alongside Thunberg, Cullen-Mouze sets up expectations of adult behavior and responsibility before quickly tearing it down: "Unfortunately, the adults today are doing the exact opposite." Side-by-side, excerpts from these two speeches demonstrate how young people construct a persona of responsibility and trust by contrasting the characteristics of adults who failed them, implying a sort of role reversal.

However, their goal is not to remain hopeless but to inspire reason and urgent action. Accordingly, youth activists also construct persona to assemble a symbolic community around human experience. A close reading of Greta Thunberg's first speech at an international conference demonstrates how she legitimizes the work of young activists to unify global action. At the twenty-fourth conferences of the Unite Nations COP24 in December 2018, Thunberg relates:

> Many people say that Sweden is just a small country, and it doesn't matter what we do. But I've learned you are never too small to make a difference. And if a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not going to school, then imagine what we could all do together if we really wanted to. ("You Are Never Too Small to Make a Difference")

Note that her first use of "we" translates to the actions of Sweden, a small country with well-known progressive and ambitious goals for sustainability. Thunberg asserts that groups of small size and significance, like citizens of Sweden, can make a difference. She carries this thought in the following sentence to connect the increasing power of youth activism and the ambition of the UN participants to affect change: "If a few children can get headlines all over the world just by not going to school, then imagine what we could all do together if we really wanted to." This short excerpt demonstrates how in just three sentences, Thunberg manages to unite country, individual, and world for action, while also positioning children as leaders of the movement.

Conclusion

Fridays For Future school strikes have continued every week consistently since August 2018, and members even adapted to online demonstrations to accommodate the COVID-19 pandemic. School strikes, as a form of non-violent civil disobedience, seek change through collective physical action that disrupts social order. However, this analysis of speeches delivered by leaders of Fridays For Future shows that youth climate activists also employ powerful rhetoric in order to participate in policies that affect their future. Targeting activist speeches at governmental conferences focuses on situations in which young people negotiate power and authority. Examining these situations helps to study how young people position themselves to speak with authority on behalf of public scientific controversies. This essay not only contributes to our understanding of the latest generation of youth climate activists, but it also addresses three ways in which their work is consequential to rhetorical theory:

1. The model of writing ecologies more accurately accounts for the rhetoric produced by youth climate activists. Because environmental change is an extensive phenomenon, it *requires* research from technical experts to conceptualize the issue, yet campaigns to undermine scientific consensus have disrupted public trust in climate science. Therefore, rhetoric from Fridays For Future activists frequently engages with the history of climate denial, challenging Bitzer's claim that rhetorical situations have intrinsic meaning and are publicly observable. In my analysis of climate justice ideology, I also revise Vatz's assertion that singular rhetors choose to make situations salient; rather, I argue those choices are part of active, lived processes.

2. Activists work strategically in technical, political, and public domains as "alternative science communicators" and position themselves as advocates of public trust in science. This rhetorical modality has the potential to reinstate expert authority in public deliberations.

Goodnight defined the personal, technical, and public spheres in 1982 to help conceptualize the worldviews implicit in particular argumentation practices (201). Writing nearly four decades ago, Goodnight feared that personal and technical argumentation would steadily erode the public sphere. However, I argue that the modern era of "fake news" has caused greater damage to societal trust in verifiable facts and technical experts. Working as alternative science communicators, youth activists remind publics of the value of expertise.

3. In addition to their strategic maneuverings in the arena of science communication, youth climate activists also have to establish their credibility in adult-dominated public spaces. Evidently, youth activists construct a persona of responsibility and trust by appealing to the irony of their role in addressing the crisis. By contrasting the characteristics of adults whose inactions fail them, the activists imply a sort of role reversal.

Through analysis of rhetorical artifacts from Fridays For Future activists, this article begins to characterize discourse among the network of today's youth climate activists. While Fridays For Future is a large and widely publicized organization, this paper does not take into account other youth climate activist groups. Further studies are necessary to continue understanding the larger community. Questions may include how do youth environmental organizations negotiate membership once members age out of the community? How do members negotiate language differences? As a decentralized, international discourse community, continued analysis of youth climate activism would provide nuanced understanding of rhetorical concepts and theory.

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